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THE SHORT BALLOT AND THE COMMISSION PLAN

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The commission plan is at least a relative success. Few cities that have the old style plan of government by mayor, council and miscellaneous minor elective officers are disposed to jubilate over the results they are getting, whereas the cities that have the commission plan seem to be unanimous in their willingness to keep it indefinitely, on the ground that whether it be perfect or not, it is certainly a vast improvement over its predecessor. Nothing in political science can be demonstrated with mathematical certainty, but I submit that for the reasons that follow, it seems reasonable to believe that the essential factor in this relative success of commission government is the fact that it has happened to involve complete acceptance of "the short ballot principle."

As defined by The Short Ballot Organization, "the short ballot principle" is—

First. That only those offices should be elective which are important enough to attract (and deserve) public examination; and

Second. That very few offices should be filled by election at one time, so as to permit adequate and unconfused public examination of the candidates.

Commission government, vesting the power in a single board which is so small and so powerful that the individual member is conspicuous, conforms precisely to this principle. There are observable certain phenomena in the operation of commission government which are clearly traceable to its short ballot.

First, the people know what they are doing on election day. Any foreigner would instantly take it for granted that this is a necessity for a workable democracy, but in this country so obvious a fact has been consistently ignored. In every city under the old style of government, we see great multitudes of people voting a "straight ticket," not because of any overwhelming loyalty to their party, but because they know of nothing better to do. The typical

American voter votes for his mayor with clear conviction. He can argue about the mayor on the street with any voter, can explain his reasons for his vote, is armed with a considerable array of facts and history, and his vote represents a well-formed opinion. The mayors of typical old-style cities are correspondingly better representatives of public opinion than the various obscure officers who make up the rest of the ticket, and politicians consistently nominate figureheads for the mayoralty because they must have as candidate some man who can stand the limelight. In this matter of the conspicuous office, on which public discussion focuses, the politician, despite the fact that he holds complete possession of the nominating machinery, is exceedingly deferential to Mr. Plain Citizen. A typical American voter, however, finds on his ballot not merely a set of candidates for mayor, but also a host of candidates for a string of petty offices. There are weak councilmen, for instance. The power of the council as a whole may be large, but it is usually so dissipated by division among an unreasonably large number of members that the individual councilman is of no account, and public opinion refuses to waste its breath upon him. There are also various minor elective administrators such as city treasurer, comptroller, board of public works, president of council, etc., offices which are either insignificant in power or so uninteresting in character that they completely escape public scrutiny.

The people are human beings and excepting under some compulsion, are not to be expected to take an interest in uninteresting things. This simple and well-known unwillingness of the people to get excited over uninteresting matters has not been taken into account in designing city governments. Charter committees have said, in effect: "The citizens ought to be interested in getting the right man for city treasurer. Therefore, we will make the city treasurer elective." Subsequent elections showed that the citizens were not interested; the great majority of them paid no attention to the matter, and in consequence the control of that office was left in the hands of a small minority. This "apathy" of the citizens can be explained and is not inexcusable when it is considered that the office of city treasurer has nothing to do with the broad policies of the town and is not truly political, the only issue involved being the question of which of the several aspirants shall hold the job and draw the salary. That is not an issue large enough, unless there be

great scandal, to cause all the men of a city to stand up, divide, and be counted. For the Charter Revision Committee to say "it's the people's duty to live up to these requirements which we lay down for them" is sheer impertinence. If the people will not graciously deign to do certain work that is laid out for them to do, the sensible and proper solution of the difficulty is to change the requirements in accordance with the people's action. If the mountain will not come to Mahommed, Mahommed must go to the mountain.

In the commission plan there are at most only five elective officers in the whole city. They are all important and share in the determination of policies, and the people consequently take a great, natural, and spontaneous interest in every one of those elective positions. Mr. Plain Citizen can argue about every one of the five men just as in the old days he could argue about the mayor. On election day he expresses a clear conviction regarding every elective office. He is completely the master of his ballot and his mastery has been acquired without conscious effort. It is as if the exhortations of reformers had succeeded in inducing all good citizens to go into politics; only in this case politics has been simplified and thereby brought to the people. Surely this unique phenomenon of the commission-governed city, the fact that the people know what they are doing on election day, is a very vital and important one. It is due to the shortening of the ballot, and not to any excitement of civic interest among the people. The people of Galveston were the same after the flood as before. The people of Houston did not undergo a moral upheaval when commission government was established. Neither did the people of Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, or Leavenworth. It was the ballot that changed, not the people. Incidentally, does it not seem possible that the people of the much-admired British cities, which also have an exceedingly "short ballot," may not be individually a bit more alive naturally on civic questions than our own people? Is it not reasonable to believe that their human nature is the same as ours, and that if an American city adopted *that* "short ballot" plan it would get similarly satisfactory results?

It is obvious that when all the people of a city know what they are doing on election day, that separate class of political specialists known as "politicians" coincidentally disappears. The politician is simply a citizen who knows what he is doing on election day. He

is a man who does all the work which citizenship requires of him. In the old style city where the work of the voter is obscure and complex, these "complete citizens" are so few as to constitute a definite ruling class—an oligarchy. Simplify the work of the citizens sufficiently and all the citizens automatically become effective politicians, and the political specialist of the past finds himself no more influential than the average citizen.

In the last analysis, I think our complaint against our city governments comes down to just this: that they have been oligarchies; that the office-holders have been under obligations to the little ruling class of politicians, and that government has consequently been in the interest of the politicians rather than in the interest of the people. The citizens, to protect their interests, have been pitted against the politicians to whom the work of politics was a means of livelihood. It was a case of the amateurs against the professionals. With the disappearance of this ruling class the great bulk of our problems may be expected to vanish. In the commission-governed cities the short ballot made it possible for a man to campaign and get elected without the permission of the politicians. That this would hold true in a large city where the difficulties of getting before the people stagger individual effort and create a special function for the experienced machines, I am not certain; but in the small cities, where commission government has thus far been tried, a candidate can get himself into the limelight and make a successful campaign, simply because the office for which he is running is important, the citizens are looking for him and are ready to listen to him, and the work of the citizens is not so complicated as to cause them to ignore the candidates and rely on ready-made tickets prepared for them by political specialists. When the citizen makes up his own ticket in his head, as he does on the short ballot basis, the candidate must run to the citizen for approval instead of running to a group of self-established ticket-makers. It is this simplicity which has made it possible for Colorado Springs, for example, to prescribe that each candidate, before he is granted a place on the official ballot, must swear that he represents no political organization—nobody but himself and his prospective constituents.

It is this same simplicity which made possible the non-partisan ballot. A non-partisan ballot must be short. In most of the cities,

thanks again to the short ballot, the Des Moines plan of the non-partisan primary has been copied to advantage, and the people, big, unorganized and clumsy as they are, have been able to take over the function of weeding out the aspirants and deciding the contests, without accepting the help of private machinery.

The short ballot is also responsible for the way the elective officials are held accountable after election. It is not enough to establish accountability for official acts in law. A bureau of municipal research by diligent delving may determine who is to blame for departmental inefficiency in almost any city, but that is by no means the same thing as having every citizen in town know beyond doubt who is responsible, without any investigation at all. A citizen of a commission-governed city finding a street dirty knows that five men whom he can name by name are responsible, that they have power to raise enough money to keep the street clean and to hire the sweepers and to see that they do the work. In such circumstances, the citizen feels some satisfaction in making a complaint, and every city has seen a most spectacular revival of interest and activity in municipal affairs among the citizenship. If the commission were a very large one so that the individual members of it were not clear targets, there would be much less satisfaction for the citizen, since the failure of a member to give the proper attention to a reasonable demand would be less conspicuous and would start less talk. The fact that each commissioner in the small commission is public property, so to speak, and is known to every citizen, as the mayor alone was known in the old style plan, causes every citizen to take notice of any fault or failure to do right. The commissioner's reputation in the community is constantly fluctuating in accordance with these criticisms. When an attack is made on him, his conspicuousness forces him to reply, and his reply is waited for by the people. The same attack aimed at an obscure and inconspicuous alderman of the old regime would go unnoticed and the alderman's political strength might not fluctuate at all. A conspicuous official is naturally more sensitive than an inconspicuous one. Put a typical old style politician into the spotlight of a commissionership and he will break loose from old associations and temptations, because he is unable to withstand the public criticism which is launched at him if he fails to serve the whole people. Time and again we have seen this phenomenon in the case of machine

mayors. In the commission government we have practically entrusted the power to a *board* of mayors.

There is no such thing in democratic problems as *inconspicuous* accountability. Conspicuousness is essential. It is only another way of saying that the people as masters of an elective servant can control him only if they see what he is doing. When all the people see what a man is doing, that man is, *ipso facto*, exceedingly conspicuous. Conspicuousness to a certain extent means "standing alone." One of a crowd cannot be conspicuous—and there we are, back at the short ballot again! Government in the light is safer than government in the dark—that is obvious—and any system which provides for such concentrated scrutiny as the commission plan does should be able to show superior results over the old style jungle of obscurities.

The commission plan is more than a short ballot plan, however. It is a *fairly correct* short ballot plan.

Any efficient organization must have a single head; not necessarily a single man, but at least a single board or committee in which all the reins of power are centered and unified. How often do we see voluntary organizations, ranging from a social picnic up to an informal association, go to pieces or develop serious inefficiency, not because of the weakness of any particular members, but from the simple lack of a single boss. Our old style governments are headless. Neither the mayor nor the council nor anyone else constitutes the court of ultimate appeal. Nobody is boss unless the people, with that singular political genius of the Americans, delegate their functions to a machine boss who will nominate and control puppets and keep them working in harmony by the use of unlawful influence.

The commission plan breaks with our old superstitions regarding the desirability of the "separation of powers" and provides a complete unification of powers; a unification that is absolutely essential to accountability. The single board has power to do everything and hence can be held responsible for any failure to do anything which the people want done. The commission is stripped of all excuses. It cannot say "it is the other man's fault." If the people demand low taxes, the commission has power to compel the departmental economies necessary to bring them about. If the people want higher departmental efficiency, the commission has power to raise

the money needed for it. In a desire to please critics on both sides, the commission is under strong inducements to attempt to secure both departmental efficiency and low taxes. The knowledge that it will secure credit for good deeds and discredit for bad, by reason of the conspicuousness of the work of the individual members, sets even political hacks to resolute endeavors to please the public.

A ballot of five officers could be arranged along other lines, and, in fact, we frequently do have ballots in American cities as short as that, but the unequal division of power and the unequal interest of the people in the officers, results usually in the overshadowing of some of the officers, both before and after election. Usually, the mayor gets all the limelight at the expense of the other elective officers. In the commission plan, however, the practical equality of the commissioners results in a correspondingly equal division of the limelight. Each man gets his share of public scrutiny and is not overshadowed. The New Jersey plan represents the latest developments on this point and is correct, inasmuch as the five men are elected without designations to office and choose the mayor from among their own number after election.

There are other features besides the short ballot which are characteristic of commission government, and are comprised in the usual definition of the plan, but I do not see how even the most ardent supporters of these features can prove that they are essential. The initiative, and referendum-by-protest are much lauded by certain enthusiasts, but Galveston and Houston, where the wave first started, have never had those features. For the same reasons it cannot be said that it is the recall which puts officials on their good behavior and accounts for the success of the plan. Neither can it be the non-partisan ballot. For the commission plan succeeded before any of these features were added to it, and has continued a success in Galveston and Houston despite their absence.

The short ballot is the magic in the Commission Plan and our ultimate salvation from government by politicians lies in the hope of universal recognition of the fact and the application of the same vital principle to our counties and states.